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The Philadelphia Quakers in the Civil War By Anthony Gigantino



The period before the American Civil War, the War itself, and the Reconstruction era after the War is one of the most fascinating time frames in the history of the world because of the immensely simultaneous feelings of dissidence and connections that existed among the people of the United States of America. The Quakers were a religious sect who exemplified this dichotomous equation. Also known as the Society of Friends, the Quakers were one of the leading abolitionist movements leading up to the Civil War. Their primary basis was in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and they also had large populations in Ohio, North Carolina, Indiana, and other parts of Pennsylvania. The Philadelphia Quakers are the primary focus because the city was the principal region of information that was planned to bring all Quaker groups together in case of an emergency.¹ Three intriguing aspects that prove the Philadelphia Quakers were an important and a historically underrepresented group during the Civil War period is the origins of their anti-slavery movement, the severance that existed among the Quakers themselves in regards to the abolition movement, and the desire of certain inspirational Quakers to strive for better reform despite the policies of the rest of the Quakers.

The Philadelphia Quakers were a relatively new group when they came to the United States from Great Britain in the mid-17th Century, but they immediately emerged as the first large assembly to preach nonviolence in America. While many early settlers from Europe and religious groups such as the Puritans and the Calvinists engaged in violence against the Native Americans, William Penn, a Quaker who was the founder of the colony of Pennsylvania, actually made peace with the Delaware Indians. In his letter of peace, Penn provided a monotheistic discourse to the Indians on why they could live peacefully being that they were both made under the same God, even though the beliefs of the Indians did not necessarily reflect the religious undertakings of the Quakers.² The nonviolent movement of the Quakers would further in the colony of Pennsylvania when leading Quakers John Woolman of Burlington County, NJ and Anthony Benezet of Philadelphia refused to pay taxes to fight the Indians against the movement led by Benjamin Franklin to arm the colony of Pennsylvania against the Indians.³ Woolman also was one of the first social philosophical writers in America to recognize the same

¹ Bauman, Richard. *For the Reputation of Truth: Politics, Religion, and Conflict Among the Pennsylvania Quakers 1750-1800*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins Press, 1971, 75.

² Lynd, Staughton. *Nonviolence in America*. New York, NY: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966, 4-5.

³ *Ibid.* 5.

injustices being inflicted on the Indians, the Negro slaves, and the poor people of America.⁴ The Quakers of Philadelphia also published the first anti-slavery accord in the history of North America in 1692, even though George Keith, the alleged writer of the document, was excommunicated by the Quakers after the publication.⁵

However, the actual beginning of the Philadelphia Quakers anti-slavery movement does not have a specific date or event that sparked their religious consciousness against this evil institution. Rather, the origins of the Quakers anti-slavery sentiment begins with their own beliefs that Christ was the shining light that brought all men into the world and made them equally regardless of their color or social status.⁶ Even though the Quakers were one of the most practical nonviolent groups in America, even they had found themselves at a temporary standstill in regards to the slavery issue because several Quakers held slaves themselves and the English Quakers instructed the Philadelphia Quakers, who were trying to stop the shipment of Negro slaves from Barbados to Philadelphia, to consult with the other American Quakers before providing a formal stance against the slave trade.⁷ Furthermore, the once upbeat and progressive Chester Meeting House began to become more conservative in its monthly meetings regarding slavery than the Philadelphia Meeting House.⁸ The two-sided nature of the Quakers regarding a proactive role towards social issues and the "American Protestant ethic" where religion was kept out of social issues proved itself with the Quakers lack of regard to the mass wave of immigrants who came to America during the 18th and 19th Centuries. The only immigrants of Philadelphia who interested the Quakers were the Doukhorbor sect from Russia because prominent Quakers such as William Allen and Stephen Grellet frequently visited Czar Nicholas I of Russia so they could make attempts to avoid the Crimean War between Russia and England.⁹

Two reasons why the Philadelphia Quakers probably didn't speak out against slavery very much from the time period of 1680 to 1750 was because the Quakers agreed not to criticize their slaveholding members and a lack of records in large slaveholding towns indicates many anti-slavery Quakers may have been silenced or threatened by local slaveholders. Many Quakers were also exiled from the Society of Friends for speaking out against slavery because it offended the wealthy slaveholding Quakers, which was the case of Ralph Sandiford of Philadelphia in 1729. Sandiford was one of the first intellectuals to publish a journal describing how the religious philosophies referring to the Bible were incorrect because the Lord had ended race after the destruction of the Canaanites.¹⁰ It wasn't until the year 1776, the same year the Declaration of Independence announced the American separation from England, that the Quakers finally denounced slavery at the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.¹¹ More than 343 slaves were

⁴ Lynd, Staughton. *Nonviolence in America*. New York, NY: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966, 14-15.

⁵ Maxwell, John Francis. *Slavery & The Catholic Church*. London, UK: The Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights, 1975, 92.

⁶ Drake, Thomas. *Quakers and Slavery in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950, 1.

⁷ Ibid. 25.

⁸ Soderlund, Jean. *Quakers & Slavery: A Divided Spirit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985, 148.

⁹ Kavanaugh, John. *The Quaker Approach*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1953, 223.

¹⁰ Ruchames, Louis. *Racial Thought in America: From the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln*. Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1969, 100-101.

¹¹ Ibid. 72-73.

emancipated between 1772 and 1790, although most of the Quaker slaveholders had very few slaves left to free.¹² Although the Philadelphia Yearly Meetings and monthly meetings lost many members due to the Quaker abolition of slavery, the academic theory of quality over quantity seemed to have worked out better for the Quakers because those who held slaves clearly felt that it damaged their economic situations and many of them simply felt that Blacks were inferior people.

The door was now open for the Quakers of Philadelphia to pursue anti-slavery measures being that they had answered their own slavery issue. One idea that the Quakers tried to implement was restitutions for free black slaves, an idea that has never been fully carried out to this date. Although the Quakers attempts to implement restitutions never worked out, such attempts to make amends with free blacks were evident at the Chester Quarterly Meeting in 1779 which included payment of each Quaker for the education of a Negro child and the aid to elderly Negroes who cannot support themselves.¹³ However, the financial aid of free blacks and their protection from white slaveholders by the Delaware Valley Quakers was simply a goal that was not accepted by the Quakers as a whole. Part of the reason for the lack of affective Quaker measures after their own slave abolition was that they were not accepted by free blacks in many areas because of the emotions they still had from being held as slaves under the Quakers. Two problems that emerged from the Quaker assistance to free Blacks was evident in Philadelphia because the free Blacks were often told what they had to do with the financial aid they received, such as sending their children to be educated by Quakers, and that they were expected to attend Quaker meetings.¹⁴ This sense of forced religion did not aid the Quaker cause because they also refused to permit free Blacks into the Society of Friends until 1790.

The abolition of Quaker slavery did not immediately turn the Society of Friends into a radical abolitionist group. Part of the reason why the Quakers weren't as adamant about abolition during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was because they stuck to the root core of the teachings of their founder, George Fox. The Quakers had learned a quiet methodology under Fox regarding the practice of religion because they trusted the workings of the Holy Spirit to guide them towards salvation, a working that limited the needs for ceremonies and priests.¹⁵ Even some Catholics experimented with Quakerism because they felt that the religion gave them a sense of feeling the Holy Spirit and not just merely reading doctrines.¹⁶ They also emphasized dialogue amongst each other after they had felt the movement of the Holy Spirit, a movement that led many Quakers to question how some of the wealthy Society members could condone slavery.¹⁷

The result of the disequilibrium among the Quakers was the division of popular American evangelicalism and Orthodox Quakerism. This schism seems to have been a turning point towards a more proactive Quaker religion.¹⁸ John Gurney would become

¹² Ibid 72-73.

¹³ Soderlund, Jean. *Quakers & Slavery: A Divided Spirit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985, 179.

¹⁴ Ibid. 184.

¹⁵ Hamm, Thomas. *The Transformation of American Quakerism: Orthodox Friends, 1800-1907*. Bloomington, IN: The University of Indiana Press, 1988, 2.

¹⁶ Steere, Douglas. *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings*. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1984, 11.

¹⁷ Ibid. 118.

¹⁸ Hamm, Thomas. *The Transformation of American Quakerism: Orthodox Friends, 1800-1907*.

the spokesman for the new proactive Quakerism to immediately abolish slavery through a movement started by New York Quaker Elias Hicks, and John Wilbur remained the prototype for the secular Quaker who was willing to gradually emancipate slaves and not value the issue as a top priority. By the year 1854, the Quakers were divided into the yearly meetings of Ohio and Philadelphia. Ohio favored Gurney while Philadelphia supported the conservative views of Wilbur. However, the strength of the Gurneyite minority in Philadelphia allowed for other Gurneyites to join the meetings in Philadelphia due to the fact that they had threatened to split and weaken the overall strength of the Quakers.¹⁹ Furthermore, the industrialization that was impacting the rural Quakers and the mixing of non-Quakers with Quaker children in Quaker schools such as Haverford College in Pennsylvania (the Quakers had a history of admitting financially plagued non-Quaker students to their institutions) began to change the outlook of Quakers from a quiet religious sect to a more proactive group.

This very same activist approach the Gurneyite or Hicksite Quakers were taking in regards to politics was the most evident through the foundation of the Underground Railroad. In 1786, George Washington had made reference to the Society of Friends aiding runaway slaves; one runaway slave that had belonged to him was guided to the North by the Quakers.²⁰ The most notable Quaker of the Underground Railroad was Levi Coffin, who has been estimated to have aided between 2,000-3,000 slaves escape from the South to his refuge house in Indiana before they moved further north. Being that the Underground Railroad was secretive due to the harsh penalties that were implemented from the Fugitive Slave Law, there is not a lot of first hand accounts about Philadelphia Quakers assisting slaves. However, Thomas Garrett stands out as one Quaker abolitionist who was an inspiring leader in the Underground Railroad. Although he was from Wilmington, Delaware, Garrett was essential in aiding Harriet Tubman to transport large numbers of slaves from Delaware to Philadelphia so that they could travel through New Jersey and into New York. Garrett was once caught and fined \$5,000. The most intriguing aspect of the Philadelphia Quakers and the Society of Friends as a whole is that because of their views that all people were created equal in God's light, they were willing to work with blacks knowing that they could be fined or jailed.²¹ This was a risk that many free whites and abolitionists were not willing to take.

When the time came for the commencement of the Civil War in 1861, the Philadelphia Quakers became one of the most notable pacifist groups in the country. Only four drafted Orthodox Quakers from Philadelphia served in the Union army out of 150 other drafted members.²² Although the Quakers stood by their strong anti-war beliefs, the Philadelphia Quakers supported President Abraham Lincoln's cause to unify the country even if it meant resorting to war.²³ Only 143 Quakers total enlisted in the Civil War but most of them served in hospitals caring for sick and wounded soldiers.²⁴

Bloomington, IN: The University of Indiana Press, 1988, 20.

¹⁹ Ibid. 34.

²⁰ PBS. *The Underground Railroad*. [updated 27 March 2005; cited 27 March 2005]. Available from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html>.

²¹ Folsom, Burton. "Thomas Garrett and the Underground Railroad." *Freeman; Irvington-on-Hudson* (2005): 29.

²² Benjamin, Philip. *The Philadelphia Quakers*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1976, 192.

²³ Ibid. 193.

²⁴ The American Civil War Homepage. *Conscientious Objectors in the Civil War*. [updated 02 February

The Quakers also were not exempt from the Conscription Act that subjected them to be drafted into the army for religious affiliations, but Lincoln did allow them to prove that they should be exempt from the War.

Unfortunately for the Quakers, the Reconstruction era saw a decline in the impact of the Society. They remained relatively silent in regards to the mistreatment of Blacks after the Civil War. The impacts of industrialization and pluralism had opened them up to a new world where they could not remain diverse in their own Society, but rather would have to adapt to a more globalized America. It was this time frame that proved all along that it was only a handful of Quakers in Philadelphia and across America that were acting as the gracious activists and not the Society members as a whole. For example, there were several Quakers were influential in improving relations with the Native Americans through better reservation conditions.²⁵ They were also essential in convincing President Grover Cleveland not to invade Canada in 1887 over a fisheries dispute and they also remained anti-war advocates regarding Pacific and Latin American territories.²⁶ The Quakers also became influential in the women's rights movement because of the impact that women in Philadelphia had played after the Civil War. Before the War, Lucretia Mott took the activist role regarding the separate monthly and yearly meetings the Philadelphia Quakers structured. While the separatist male and female structure of Quaker meetings remained intact during the Civil War, Quaker women took on a proactive role by assisting blacks to receive the necessities they needed after they found themselves on their own in territories the Union had conquered. Other contributions of the Philadelphia Quaker women are the integration of marriages outside the Society of Friends and the improvement of slum housing in South Philadelphia.²⁷ Although Quaker women such as Mott were influential in the women's suffrage movement, Philadelphia Quakers played little role in the eventual 1920 Constitutional ratification which gave women the right to vote, a movement that New England Quaker Susan B. Anthony was very active in obtaining.

The Quakers journey through the Civil War era is a parallel that relates to the American public as a whole during this time period: those who have and those who do not. The disequilibrium among the Quakers was the same as the division between abolitionists and slaveholders; many Quakers felt that slavery was immoral and useless like the abolitionists while the slaveholding Quakers and Southern agrarian slaveholders felt that it was their right to hold property and they could become economically crippled if slavery were to be abolished. After the Civil War, only the voice of dedicated Quaker women eventually led to the victory of the women's right to vote as most of the Quaker men took a traditional quietist position on the issue. In essence, it was the contributions of strong Philadelphia Quakers such as John Woolman, Anthony Benezet, and Lucretia Mott who paved the way for the Quakers to become "hands on" activists and not the works of the complacent majority of the Society of Friends. Nevertheless, the Quakers

2002; cited 27 March 2005]. Available from <http://www.civilwarhome.com/conscientiousobjectors.htm>.

²⁵ Kavanaugh, John. *The Quaker Approach*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1953, 96-97.

²⁶ Benjamin, Philip. *The Philadelphia Quakers*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1976, 193-194.

²⁷ Ibid. 161.

were an important historical group whose contributions have been overshadowed in history.

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